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LANDOR AND B

It is always interesting to hear both sides of a question; for one thus flatters oneself with judicial prerogatives, and one is reminded as well of the infinite capacity for misinterpreting which is all mankind's prerogative. In this case of Landor *vs.* Betham, moreover, there is a certain liveliness in the details and a new measure of justice to be measured out.

The principal source of our knowledge of Landor is still the biography by John Forster, first issued in 1869 and later in revised form as the first volume of *Landor's Life and Works*, London, 1874. In Book III Forster tells the following story.

After his return from Spain Landor conceived an overpowering desire to possess the estate of Llanthony in northern Monmouthshire, establish himself there for his own good and the profit of his descendants (although he was still unmarried), and, among other schemes for rehabilitating an outworn farm-land, do—as he said without apparent humor—“what no man has ever done in England, plant a wood of cedar of Lebanon”. Long afterwards he told Forster that he had planted a million trees, although it is doubtful if he planted a tenth of that number. And this is characteristic of his Welsh dreams. Llanthony was a wild, romantic corner of Wales, with a ruined abbey (still more ruined by a recent owner's outbuildings), said to have been once occupied by St. David. The poetic appeal was strong, the practical appeal wanting, although not to Landor's mind. At the cost of various financial complications, including the sale of his interest in property belonging to his mother and an act of Parliament to confirm the breach of entail, he purchased Llanthony in 1809. His plans, besides creating a new Lebanon, importing sheep from Segovia, and introducing the newest improvements in agriculture, embraced also the uplift and civilizing of the semi-barbarous natives and the rearing of a stately mansion for himself. All the descriptions of Llanthony confirm one's suspicions and premonitions of failure.

Old Drayton, in the *Polyolbion* that both Lamb and Landor

admired and a few of the judicious still dip into, gives a picture which is but little altered to-day:—

“'Mongst Hatterill's lofty hills, that with the clouds are crown'd,
The Valley Ewias lies, immured so deep and round,
As they below that see the mountains rise so high,
Might think the straggling herds were grazing in the sky :
Which in it such a shape of solitude doth bear,
As Nature at the first appointed it for pray'r.”

More precise is Sir Sidney Colvin's description:—

“This valley winds for some twelve miles between two high continuous ridges, of which the sides are now flowing and now precipitous, here broken into wooded dingles, here receding into grassy amphitheatres, and there heaped with copse-grown ruins of ancient landslips. Along its bed there races or loiters according to the weather—and it is a climate notorious for rain—the stream Hodeni, Honddu, or Hondy. The opening of the valley is toward the south, and was blocked in ancient times with thickets and morasses, so that its only approach was over one or other of its lofty ridges.”

If the background was unpropitious for Utopian dreams, it was but the fit setting for tragi-comedy. One of Landor's first steps was to apply to Southey for a promising tenant. He himself did not reside on the estate; it would be two seasons, he said, before he hoped to “have one room to sit and converse in, with two or three bedrooms”. At the end of three years he had spent ten thousand pounds and had to show for his money and time a half-built house and the hostility of all his neighbors. “My people are idle and drunken”, he told Southey. “Idleness gives them time, and drunkenness gives them spirit, for mischief. . . . The earth contains no race of human beings so totally vile and worthless as the Welsh.”

To provide a promising tenant was no simple task for Southey, however. Mrs. Wordsworth's brother Thomas, among others, declined the position “because the vale is too narrow, the hills too steep, and Landor will have no trouble in building farm-houses”,—he was to have trouble enough in building his own—“tho' he is ready to find materials”. But Thomas Hutchinson admitted that the soil was “the best possible”.

Thus far, in the main, Forster (excepting the last quotation) and what is generally known. What follows is a harmony—*discordia concors*—of the events according to Forster and the events according to Betham, the latter taken from documents published in *A House of Letters*, edited by Ernest Betham. Forster's attitude is sufficiently clear from his introduction of the new tenant.

"The very last man in Southey's thoughts, the man of all others he was *not* likely to have chosen, the spiteful Fates had themselves already laid hold of, and, when the rest had withdrawn, were to thrust unasked on the scene. These are things of destiny. While Southey continued busily making inquiries, this man heard of them, wrote to Londor, and offered himself as well known to Southey. 'I shall owe a tenant to you, after all,' wrote Londor exultingly. In less sanguine tone Southey made reply that the person in question (whom I shall refer to as B)"—O touching restraint of Forster's!—"was certainly known to him, and came of an excellent stock, but he had never thought of asking him to be tenant at Llanthony. His knowledge of him was derived from a liking for one of his sisters, very dear to Charles Lamb as well as himself for her genius and goodness, though both had to be discerned through a most unprepossessing exterior and a nervousness looking like silliness. 'B has probably to learn farming,' he ominously added, 'and so far is less desirable than Hutchinson.'"

Against this we have not only Forster's admission on a later page that Southey did recommend B, at the suggestion of B's sister, but also Southey's letter to Miss Betham:—

"You will think it very odd if I should prove the means of suiting your brother with a farm. Londor has one to let upon an improving lease. . . . Should your brother think it worth while to write, his address is 'Walter Savage Londor, Llanthony, Abergavenny.' Let him use my name as an introduction."

This was in 1811. Early in 1813 Londor sent Southey a letter which opened "lightly" (says Forster) with the announcement of a comedy completed, but—

"passed into tragical utterance in the very next line, as it conveyed the terrible announcement that with the tenant B, who had introduced himself on the strength of Southey's

name; the 'agriculturist', of whom so many letters had been written; the supposed man of capital, to whom the best farm of Llanthony had been let on terms extravagantly liberal; the real man of destiny, pre-elected to be a plague and torment to both friends; Landor was now plunged over head and ears in disputes of an irreconcilable bitterness, and to which the only possible issue must be hopeless and irretrievable loss.

"The substance of his statement [continues Forster] may be briefly given. Not on the man himself only, but on his father and other members of his family, he had, in his grand impetuous way, heaped no end of favours and liberalities for Southey's sake. He had put church-livings at the father's disposal, and out of them grew the first disputes. Besides the large farm originally let to B himself, he had, at the sacrifice of a good tenant, leased him another. During all the time he had been at Llanthony, he had never refused any request of the man, however unreasonable; and suddenly he had been made conscious of all he had lost by it. 'By a series of such conduct as might be expected from a sailor turned farmer, and by living at the rate of a thousand a year, he has succeeded in spending his wife's fortune of three thousand pounds, and in fifteen months I have received no rent from him.' Non-payment, indeed, had been the least of his misdeeds. As soon as B found that limits were to be put to the indulgences he expected, he declared open war against his landlord, subjected him to every kind of annoyance, brought three or four brothers to poach over his manors and worry him the more, and, finally, 'discharged me and my gamekeeper from shooting on his farm.'"

Forster intimated that there was some exaggeration in all this, which anyone acquainted with Landor would take for granted, but discounts his admission by later taking it all seriously. Then to reinforce his case he indulges himself in easy sarcasms against B, in one instance confusing Charles Betham with his brother Frederick—who, by the way, merited a special attack because of the damages for libel that Landor was forced to pay him—and quotes a letter from Elia:—

"'I forgot to tell you,' wrote Charles Lamb nearly twenty years later, in an unpublished letter now lying before me, 'I knew all your Welsh annoyancers, the measureless B's. I knew a quarter of a mile of them. Seventeen brothers

and sixteen sisters, as they appear to me in memory. There was one of them that used to fix his long legs on my fender, and tell a story of a shark, every night, endless, immortal. How have I grudged the salt-sea ravener not having had his gorge of him! The shortest of the daughters measured five foot eleven without her shoes. Well, some day we may confer about them. But they were tall. Surely I have discovered the longitude—' Of course the hero of the shark was Landor's chief tormentor. He had been in the East and in the West Indies; and, for the sake of the whole family of sharks he was to bring up to have their gorge of Landor, the salt-sea ravener had spared him."

Nearly twenty years later would mean, say, 1833; not long, therefore, before Lamb's death; and when both he and Landor (they were born only eleven days apart) were but a little short of three score. Now Lamb was a humorist, and a gentle one; and it were unkind to make his reminiscence a partner to gratuitous sarcasms. Yet, strange to relate, these were not reminiscences at all, but a quotation from an essay which Lamb had published in 1825 over the pseudonym of "Lepus". Lamb's hero of the shark, moreover, was "Captain Beacham", who may or may not have been Captain John Betham, whom Lamb knew, but certainly was not Charles Betham, who was Landor's tenant. It looks, at any rate, as though F (for let us curtail him as he his victim) had a little misunderstood the Elian fun.

Southey's reply to the Llanthony letter of troubles was a mixture of chagrin and apology: vouching again for the Betham family, if not for its individual members. Landor meanwhile was occupied with his comedy and his *Idyllia*. But of these and of his various afflictions, his non-Bethamite financial losses, his unsuccessful efforts to be made justice of the peace, his rather Miltonic marriage, and so on, there is no occasion to speak now. He had come to "the most critical hour of his fortune". The whole neighborhood was aroused against him. The native Welshmen, the tenants he had introduced, the clergy and the magistracy—he had made enemies of them all. "He was like a lion baited by curs", says Sir Sidney Colvin, sympathetically. And the infinite annoyances which he suffered and which F recounts are pathetic enough. Yet all the while the

Comic Spirit stands by smiling. One offender was caught, and to make out a good case against him Landor swore that he was in personal danger; the man was held in £10, and soon afterward drank himself to death; Landor was accused of being the cause of his death, and replied by prosecuting his accuser for slander. Another submitted, through an attorney, a bill for £18, long after he had left Landor's estate. Landor, of course, denied the debt, became involved in legal tape, and was outlawed. Another, named Toombes, rented a farm of Landor, ran off without paying, and died of drink in Abergavenny; then a friend of Toombes publicly accused Landor of murder; Landor brought suit, and lost his case! These were but a few of the lion-baitings. We have our story of them mainly from one side, related in the Landorian style of exaggeration, and supported by the unjudicial sympathy of Forster. But no doubt the sinned-against and sinning were at least evenly balanced. Landor and his tenants were simply incommensurable terms.

The storm-centre of his distress, however, was B. It was B who, by Landor's declaration, drove him from the country. And in this matter we have now part of the other side, presented, to be sure, without the vigor and vividness of Landor's letters to Southey, but largely atoning for this deficiency by plainness and dignity which make for convincingness. The Comic Spirit draws nearer; one almost hears the silent laughter; inaudible certainly to B and probably to Landor, although he could sometimes enjoy reflexive humor.

The financial details are less interesting. Landor claimed a debt of £1,968, 17s, 6d; Betham denied owing half that amount. He held that part of his rent was to be balanced against expenditures he had made on the buildings and compensation for Landor's non-performance of certain items of the original agreement. Landor disputed the details, which were further complicated by sales of stock and wages for labor, refused to compromise, and resorted to the law. Betham filed a bill in equity and obtained an injunction to prevent Landor's suing him. Landor then let more than seven months pass without action. Betham again suggested private arbitration, but "Mr. L. declined this, unless I would also refer the action brought

by me against him for a libel on my character; and I believe, but am less certain, my brother's action also; conditions obviously inadmissible". When the injunction expired Landor, instead of suing, attached Betham's property, whereupon Betham obtained a replevin. . . . Thus a comedy of law.

It seems, moreover, that in refusing Betham's offer to settle out of court Landor tried to put his opponent at a disadvantage. Let the defendant speak, although his language is not remarkable for perspicuity:—

"Mr. Landor states a proposal made by him to Mr. Adair (to whom I shall always with pride acknowledge my obligations), to appoint that gentleman judge of our differences. This it would be difficult to reconcile with the refusal which my offers to refer have met with. But when it is considered that Mr. L. was not known to Mr. Adair, and that it was made without purporting to be with my concurrence, I think little doubt will be felt that he expected Mr. Adair would decline it, and that it was hazarded for the purpose of giving to his proceedings an appearance of candour which did not really belong to them."

One or two more details of Betham's published defence—which is in truth a defence and, although long, carefully avoids all recrimination in tone or in statement—may be presented in his own words. They will stand as examples of the many more complaints and counter-complaints:—

"The Sawpit, I certainly prevented Mr. Landor from using; but on the avowed principle, which I still profess, that while I wish to accommodate my neighbors, I will not suffer encroachments to be made on my property, in open and insulting defiance of my will. The Sawpit in question is mine; and Mr. Landor only attempted to make use of it as an exercise of right, which I deny belongs to him.

"The raising of the sheep-cot was announced to Mr. Landor before it was begun; and the avowed object was to prevent his annoying me by obstructing a drain and inundating my house, and digging a sawpit in the Abbey yard close to my windows; which, when finished, his men came (I was from home), and, on this very sawpit, insulted my family with the most obscene songs."

But the most startling incident of this mediæval feud in modern Britain is the conflict over the removal of some trees with or without the roots thereof. Here the cat-and-dog disagreement rose to martial proportions. Embattled armies met in internecine struggle. And Father Zeus gave the victory to justice and inferior numbers. Thus, heaven helping, right makes might; weakness and truth unite to overcome the hosts of evil. Yet, what is more to be wondered at, the decision of listed field is supported and repeated by judicial bench. What a picture is here of the poet among men, what a scene for Cervantes: Don Walter, the last of the barons! But listen to Betham's uncolored narrative:—

“The assertion that the Timber, which I prevented him from removing, was cut down to enable him to grant me indulgences, has already been made in a Bill of Equity against me, and denied on my oath; I solemnly repeat that denial. I had consented to the trees being grubbed up, that I might plow the land; and when Mr. Landor cut them down, and refused to grub up the roots, I refused my permission to their being removed. He attempted it by force, arming men and women to invade my fields. I met his hosts with very inferior numbers, armed as I could provide them, and maintained my ground. . . . An action was brought to punish me for this resistance: I defended it, and it was dropped. A Bill was then filed to prohibit my obstructing the removal of the Timber. In my answer, I maintained my old ground, that the condition on which I had consented to the trees being removed, the grubbing up of the roots, had not been complied with; and by the same order which authorizes him to remove the trees, he is directed, without delay, to cause the roots and stools to be properly and effectually grubbed up; and I was awarded costs.”

Well, taken in one way, all this is small enough; no more than an agitation in a camellia vessel. The author of *Gebir* was ever a fighter, and one fight more or less was of little moment. Storm clouds hung low over his whole life. That was indeed a fateful whim of his, to possess Llanthony Abbey and bring light into the darkness of a Welsh ravine. But is not every effort to force the betterment of man foredoomed? Freedom must slowly broaden

down. Mankind will move slowly, or not at all,—at any rate on the up-grades. And Landor was made for other things.

“Parce, puer, stimulis et fortius utere loris”,

was the motto of his Muse, but not of his moods. He was of those who kick against the pricks without seeing that they kick against themselves. He was always grasping nettles, and blaming the nettles. Verily the gods both sighed and smiled over this Llanthony adventure; and we may do the same. But Forster was no *homo ridens*, and Landor, perhaps, was in no position to see the joke. Both did an injustice to the Bethams, who were respectable as human nature goes, an injustice into which it was cruel to drag Charles Lamb. Nor was it fair for Landor to add anything to Southey's burden, who always had more troubles than he could carry. But if Betham drove Landor from strife and confusion in Wales to pleasanter scenes in Italy, the weight of this ignominy will scarcely afflict his shade. It may be, in sooth, that we should apologize for disturbing his ashes. Then—

“ . . . in perpetuom, frater, ave atque vale.”

PAULL FRANKLIN BAUM.

Cambridge, Massachusetts.